



Middle East Cancer Consortium Expanding in Size and Influence

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Photo: NCI's Dr. Joe Harford congratulates Turkey's Minister of Health, Dr. Recep Akdag, on signing the agreement bringing Turkey into MECC.

With the addition of Turkey earlier this year, the Middle East Cancer Consortium (MECC) continues to grow and influence cancer prevention and care in its member countries. In June, Turkey, with a population of about 70 million, officially joined MECC at a signing ceremony in Ankara, Turkey. Other member countries include Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. Turkey's addition brings the population represented by MECC to more than 160 million.

"Even in a part of the world where strife and violence are a regular part of life, cancer is a reality that we must do our best to address," said National Cancer Institute (NCI) Director Dr. Andrew C. von Eschenbach. "After more than 8 years, MECC has proven that despite political and social differences, people can come together and do the work of trying to improve other people's lives."

Much of MECC's focus has been on establishing and supporting population-based cancer registries in member countries. With its entry into MECC, Turkey will establish its own registry, based in the city of Izmir. Beginning early next year with NCI funding, Dr. John Young of Emory University will conduct a training course for Turkish cancer registrars. To facilitate registry training, MECC has established course material and a standards manual, which in this case will be translated into Turkish. The standards manual has already been translated into English and Greek; Arabic and Hebrew versions are anticipated. Staff from NCI's Surveillance Epidemiology, and End Results (SEER) program also have assisted MECC registries with training, technical support, and quality control.

The first-ever comparison of cancer incidence rates in Israel and one of its Arab neighbors, Jordan, was published in the *European Journal of Cancer Prevention* in 2003. The paper had Israeli, Jordanian, and American authors, including three from NCI. This will likely be the first of many publications

based on data from MECC-affiliated registries, explains Dr. Joe Harford, head of NCI's OIA and the primary liaison between MECC and NCI. Plans also are underway for an NCI monograph that will provide a more detailed analysis and commentary on cancer incidence in the Middle East using data derived from selected MECC-affiliated registries.

MECC is also engaged in activities beyond the registries, including educational workshops for health care professionals from MECC member countries. Earlier this year, for example, MECC held a workshop on palliative care, with experts from the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East serving as faculty.

"Palliative care has been identified by the World Health Organization as one of the highest cancer priorities for countries with the most severely limited resources," explains Dr. Harford. "Throughout the developing world, cancer patients often present with more advanced, less curable cancer, making building capacity in palliative care and symptom management all the more pressing."

MECC has also begun to expand its influence in the region beyond cancer, holding a workshop earlier this year on disease prevention and health promotion. More about MECC can be found on its Web site, www.mecc.cancer.gov.